

Space Ambassadors Bring Cosmos to Earth

E.V. volunteers work to build interest in NASA programs

BY JOE KULLMAN
East Valley (Arizona) Tribune

Offer up mathematics or other abstract sciences as topics of discussion and many people wince. Weave those subjects into tales about the mysteries of outer space, however, and you've got a rapt audience.

Absorb people in the intrigue of faraway planets, moons, comets and meteors and before long, science-phobics have cleverly been introduced to rudimentary calculus.

That's part of the thrill Ross Tucker gets as a "solar system ambas-

sador" for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

The Arizona State University physics major is one of more than 250 volunteers around the country helping NASA keep the general public informed of the U.S. space program's promising adventures.

John Reiss Jr. likes to tell business groups about the practical spin-offs already derived from space-related research. An environmental consultant and amateur astronomer who lives on Scottsdale, Reiss is in his third year as a member of Arizona's contingent of space ambassadors seeking to spread the word through school programs, community groups, gardening clubs or bowling leagues.

Space exploration has led to significant advancements in computer, communications and medical technology, not to mention development of nifty portable power tools, Reiss said.

But beyond getting to talk about space-age gadgetry, the program makes him feel involved in the quest to unveil the secrets of the cosmos.

"It's about discovering who we are and where we're going as a human race," Reiss said.

For Laurice Dee of Mesa, a high-tech industry researcher with advanced degrees in biomechanics and kinesiology, the ambassadorship lets her apply her expertise outside the laboratory.

She has pur-

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ROSS TUCKER
"Solar System Ambassador" for NASA

sued the opportunity with particular zeal. Dee has given 36 presentations since joining the program, second most of any space ambassador, said Kay Ferrari, who coordinates the 5-year-old program from NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in California.

"We have great people in Arizona," Ferrari said. "When you have people who are so enthusiastic, it has so much more meaning to the public."

The ambassadors' sessions are designed more as "info-tainment" than highbrow lectures. Many use slide shows, videos, sci-fi movies, CDs and space-flight memorabilia.

NASA takes the program seriously, however. More than a dozen major missions including probes of Jupiter, Saturn, Mars and the far reaches of the solar system allot funding to the ambassador project.

"After we had already put a man on the moon, public interest sort of dropped off," Ferrari said. "We want to reignite it."

Tucker's work as a NASA ambassador has only gotten the 18-year-old more excited about the possibilities.

"My long-term goal is to be an astronaut," Tucker said. "I suspect my generation will go to Mars. I'd like to be there."

NASA AMBASSADOR

■ See the Web site
www.jpl.nasa.gov/ambassador/usstates.html

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John Reiss Jr. wheels his telescope outside his home to stargaze Friday in Scottsdale. Reiss, a "solar system ambassador" for NASA, is doing public outreach to keep people informed about the space program.